

The limits of Russia's 'soft power'

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Abstract

Moscow came late to the soft power game, but made it an integral feature of the drive to restore Russia's great power status. Russia has a proud cultural legacy and has invested heavily in trying to promote a positive image of the country abroad, for example through the Russia Today television channel. However, the leadership faced the challenge of dealing with the complex legacy of the Soviet past, and finding a viable development model for Russia: it is hard for a country facing economic stagnation to project a positive international image. Russia's authoritarian turn since 2004, and its use of force in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, have reinforced negative stereotypes of Russia as a hard power. For these reasons Russian leaders have largely failed to develop soft power as an effective policy tool.

Key words

Russia, soft power, 'Russian world,' Russia Today, propaganda

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‘The notion that somehow Russia is in a stronger position now, in Syria or in Ukraine, than they were before they invaded Ukraine or before he had to deploy military forces to Syria is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of power in foreign affairs or in the world generally. Real power means you can get what you want without having to exert violence.’ President Barack Obama. (Goldberg 2016)

The popular image is of Russia that of a soft power success story, spreading propaganda and dissimulation through its slick Russia Today television network, an army of internet trolls, and the actions of its charismatic leader, Vladimir Putin.² Some analysts even see Russia and China joining forces and offering an authoritarian alternative to prevailing liberal international institutions. However, this article will argue that Russian leaders have largely misunderstood the character of soft power, in ways that have become quite damaging to Russia’s national interests, and have failed to develop it as an effective policy tool.

Few concepts have experienced as meteoric a rise as that of ‘soft power’ – that is, expanding a nation’s influence through persuasion and attraction rather than through military or economic pressure. Coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 and laid out in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, the term spread quickly beyond the pages of political science journals, and entered the lexicon of government officials and even military planners all around the world. It fused with another trend, ‘nation branding,’ that came out of business marketing and tourism agencies (Anholt 2006; Dinnie 2007).

In the post-cold war world, the military power balance was less salient, while the global integration of national economies accelerated. In the turbulent and rapidly changing world of the

² Lankina and Niemczyk (2015) make the case for Russia’s ability to use soft power effectively to defend its authoritarian political regime.

2000s, the concept of soft power seemed to capture something new in the interactions between states, and national leaders scrambled to incorporate it into their analysis and their policies. Attention shifted from states towards non-state actors, and from national identities and interests to norms of international behavior.

However, as is often the case, as the concept spread it came to be applied in circumstances quite different from those at its point of origin. In the process it began to lose its cogency and coherence. Back in 1977 political scientist Murray Edelman published a book entitled *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*, referring to the domestic political reform programs launched in the US in the 1960s, such as the ‘war on poverty.’ The concept of soft power has arguably experienced a similar trajectory – its success as an idea exceeded its utility as a policy instrument.

This article explores the trajectory of soft power in the case of Russia. What does the Russian government understand by soft power, and how has the concept has been incorporated into its policies over the past decade? In the late 2000s many Russian experts embraced Nye’s concept of soft power as key to understanding the success of the United States in establishing its dominant global position over the course of the 20th century. Even the collapse of the Soviet Union itself was seen by some Russian analysts as the result of US soft power, with the US conspiring to undermining the internal stability of the Soviet state even as the USSR managed to preserve an approximate hard power parity with the US (Van Herpen 2015, 8).

The release of Nye’s book also coincided with the wave of ‘color revolutions’ that toppled pro-Russian autocrats in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Mitchell 2012). The Russian leadership saw these developments as the result of a deliberate policy to use democracy promotion to expand the US sphere of influence. This process picked up

again in the ‘Arab spring’ uprisings of 2011, which triggered a fear that the US would try to encourage a democratic revolution in Russia itself.

Russian leaders were determined to master – and counter – the arts of soft power projection that seemed to so effectively serve US interests. The government invested hundreds of millions of dollars in various soft power projects, such as the Russia Today international television network launched in 2005, on which it would spend \$2 billion by 2013 (Zavadski 2015). A 2010 Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy document laid out the role that cultural promotion should play in Russian foreign policy (Ministry 2010). It argued that ‘cultural diplomacy like no other aspect of “soft power” can strengthen the country’s international authority’ and fight off efforts to ‘contain’ Russia. In a 2011 speech Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said ‘Today it is clear that without a skillful use of “soft power” it is not possible to defend one’s country’s interests’ (Studneva 2012). In February 2013 the concept of soft power duly appeared in the Foreign Policy Concept for the first time, where it was described as ‘an essential part of contemporary international politics’ (Ministry 2013).

However, Russia’s soft power gambit enjoyed only modest success, and its impact was drowned out by Russia’s deployment of hard power in the form of its military incursions into Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). It became apparent that the Russian understanding of soft power differed from that to be found in Nye’s work, and that it was being used merely as a handmaiden to Russia’s hard power (Nye 2013).

For persuasion and attraction to work, the various players have to accept the rules of the game, the established discourse of diplomacy – and those rules were overwhelmingly shaped by the US and its Western partners. That makes it very hard for outsiders such as the BRICs to develop a soft power narrative of their own, since it is seen from the outset as a challenge to the

status quo, and hence triggering hard power fears about a ‘rising China’ or ‘revisionist Russia’ (Stanovaia 2014). Some Russian scholars question whether this western product is at all useful for the rest of the world (Kovaleva 2013).

Nye’s theory was centered on the US use of soft power as something distinct from but complementary to hard power in maintaining the preeminent position of the United States in the global order throughout the 20th century. The concept was developed with respect to the US in the 1990s, when it was in the unprecedented position of a ‘sole superpower’ in the ‘unipolar’ world following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Naumov 2015). Rising powers like China and India were keen to try to utilize soft power to boost their influence. Similarly, declining powers such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and the Russian Federation looked to soft power to try to regain their former influence, or stem their rate of decline. However, for these countries, soft power may turn out to be a costly distraction.

Since Nye’s book was published, the US has seen its own soft power erode. Military interventions by the US in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya showed the limits of US hard power – and seriously damaged the US soft power image (Koniukheva 2010). President George W. Bush’s soft power packaging of the ‘war on terror’ failed to gain traction, alienating large majorities in Moslem countries. Did this mean that soft power no longer worked for the US – and could therefore be picked up by Russia and China? Or did it mean that soft power was redundant as a category of analysis and practice?

Putin on soft power

A central theme of Putin's presidency has been his concern to restore Russia's standing in the world, and he recognizes the importance of all dimensions of the issue – security, diplomacy, economics, and image.

When nominated acting president in December 1999 Putin, a 17 year KGB veteran, was seen as an exponent and practitioner of hard power. At the same time, however, in his pre-election manifesto he laid out an ambitious program to integrate Russia with the West and catch up with the world's leading industrial powers (Putin 1999). Lankina and Niemczyk (2015) argue that the concept of soft power was presaged in the Doctrine of Information Security approved in September 2000.

In a newspaper article published in February 2012, shortly before he was re-elected as president Putin laid out his foreign policy vision. He strongly condemned the Arab Spring, blaming it on US efforts to destabilize governments in the region under the guise of democracy promotion. He explained that:

'Soft power' is a complex of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals without the use of force, through information and other means of influence. Unfortunately, these methods are often used to encourage and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulation of public sentiment, and outright interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states (Putin 2012).

On 7 May 2012 Putin issued decree no. 605 'On measures to realize the foreign policy course of the Russian Federation.' In that decree Putin urged diplomats to take an active role and not just serve as 'passive observers.' That should include consideration of 'new technologies such as so-

called soft power.’ He argued that ‘We must recognize that the image of Russia abroad is not formed by us, and it is often distorted.’

Later that year, addressing a meeting of Russian ambassadors on 9 July, he defined ‘soft power’ as:

The promotion of one’s own interests and approaches through persuasion and attraction of empathy (*simpatii*) towards one’s own country, based on its achievements not only in the material sphere but also in the spheres of intellect and culture (Soveshchanie poslov 2012).

Putin went on to explain:

Russia’s image abroad is not formed by us, because it is often distorted and does not represent the real situation in our country nor our contribution to global civilization, science, culture, and the position of our country in international affairs. Those who are shooting and sending out rocket attacks left and right are praised, while those who warn about the need for a restrained dialog are somehow guilty. And we are guilty for having failed to explain our position. (Soveshchanie poslov 2012)

In summoning the ambassadors to Moscow, Putin was resurrecting a Soviet-era practice of biennial meetings that had been discontinued in 1986. This in itself is testimony to the renewed importance he placed on Russia’s global diplomatic presence. During the presidency of Boris

Yeltsin in the early 1990s, diplomacy centered on direct personal dealings with the leaders of the US and other major powers, run directly out of the presidential administration.

The burden of history

Efforts by contemporary Russian leaders to build up Russia's soft power do not start with a blank slate. They do not have to face the challenge of how to draw attention of the world public to their country, as would Estonia or Vanuatu. On the contrary, they face the problem that much of the world already has a strong – and usually negative – impression of Russia. Actions by Russian leaders are interpreted through pre-existing cognitive frameworks, which portray Russia as a dangerous and unpleasant place (Tsygankov 2009). One of the leading Russian experts called this 'traditional image impotence' (Solov'ev 2011).

Russia has a deep and proud history, and a distinctive culture – some Russians would say 'civilization' – which has given much to global culture (Poe 2003). Russia's contributions range from the scientific achievements of Mendeleev's table of the elements to the successes of the Soviet space program, which put the first object into space (Sputnik in 1957) and the first man in space (Yuri Gagarin in 1961). Its cultural contributions are profound in art, music, literature, ballet, film and theater. Lev Tolstoi's *War and Peace* may be the best-known novel in the world, and at any one time there are likely to be at least two Anton Chekhov plays being performed on the London stage.

With that heritage, achieving a prominent standing for Russia in soft power should have been fairly straightforward. Unfortunately, the achievements of Russian high culture do not easily translate into admiration for today's Russia. For there is of course another side to Russian history, equally well-known in the West – that of a reactionary Tsarist regime, characterized by

deportation to Siberia, suppression of nationalist rebellions, and launching pogroms against the Jews. ('Pogrom' is one of the few Russian words to have migrated to English, in the 1880s.)

These negative features of Russian society were noted by Western observers from the earliest times, and many Russians argue that they were deliberately inflated by foreign critics who were fearful of Russia's power. (Tsygankov 2013) Since the 18th century Russia has been the largest country in the world, and its population has always been twice that of its nearest European rival. From Sigismund Herberstein's *Notes on Muscovite Affairs* (1549), to the Marquis de Custine's *Empire of the Tsars* (1839), and George Orwell's *1984* (1948), Russia has been the target of a succession of skilled and influential writers who portrayed the country as a frightful and dangerous place.

The Soviet Union that arose after 1917 had a more positive side to present to the world – that of industrial progress, scientific achievements, social equality, and so on. These features won a solid base of support amongst Western socialists and anti-colonial forces in the developing world. The proudest achievement of the Soviet Union, which has dominated state propaganda from the 1960s through the 2010s, is the victory over fascism in World War Two. This is known in Russian as the 'Great Patriotic War' (to be distinguished from the 'Patriotic War' of 1812).³ The Soviet Union had an extensive network of propaganda agencies advancing what would now be called the soft power of the USSR, from the TASS and APN news agencies to the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies that organized public diplomacy and cultural exchanges.

However, the attractive features of Soviet communism were accompanied by new forms of oppression, in the form of collectivization, the Purges, collectivization, the Gulag and so on.

³ A more literal translation would be 'fatherland war' (*otechestvennaia voina*).

On top of that the Soviet Union was pledged to world revolution, and occupied a dozen countries in Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II.

In the 1990s, Russia did not make a completely clean break with the Soviet past. The Soviet Union was dismantled by the leaders of its constituent republics, and in Russia at least it was not toppled by a popular revolution, nor even by a democratic electoral process or referendum. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was banned, but later resurfaced as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Some Soviet institutions collapsed, such as the central planning apparatus, but others were preserved more or less intact – such as the army, the foreign ministry, and the KGB (reformed as the Federal Security Service – FSB).

The 1990s saw the arrival of democracy and market capitalism. Far from being a triumph, however, this came to be perceived both inside and outside Russia as something of a disaster. Russian democracy quickly turned sour – epitomized by President Boris Yeltsin's sending the army to shell the parliament in 1993, following their refusal to obey Yeltsin's illegal order to disband. In 1994 the army launched a bloody war to prevent the secession of Chechnya. Meanwhile, on the economic front 'shock therapy' saw the immiseration of large sections of the population, alongside the rise of social inequality, organized crime, and bureaucratic corruption on an epic scale. Mafia hit men and the immoral, free-spending 'New Russians' became the face of the new Russia, spreading from newspaper and TV reports to television serials and Hollywood movies. This new 'branding' of the new Russia happened very quickly and spontaneously. It was not orchestrated by the US – in the 1990s, the Clinton Administration was trying to pretend that everything was fine, in order to keep Yeltsin in power. The new negative image of Russia was exaggerated, of course, but it did have a basis in reality. As the Russian saying goes, 'don't blame the mirror if it shows your ugly face.'

This complex and deep legacy poses several conundrums for post-Soviet Russian leaders and society (Sherlock 2011). If they emphasize and confront the dark pages in their own history, they risk giving ammunition to their foreign critics, and disorienting the older generations who had lived as loyal Soviet subjects. If they ignore unpleasant aspects of their past, then critics will accuse them of being in denial.

The Soviet legacy casts a long shadow over current nation branding efforts, but Russia has made no serious effort to convert the ‘common past’ into a concrete future project. Russia’s political elite often appeals to the Soviet experience as a great power, as in Putin’s famous saying that ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest political disaster of the 20th century’ (Putin 2005). Less often quoted is the following sentence, where Putin said ‘he who does not regret the fall of the Soviet Union has no heart, but he who thinks it can be restored has no head.’ This phrase captures the contradictory stance of the Putin regime to the Soviet past. It cannot reject the Soviet legacy entirely – in part because it draws its own legitimacy by claiming to be the successor to Soviet power. But it cannot embrace the Soviet model in its entirety, for a variety of reasons – because that would imply territorial claims on the former Soviet states; and because Putin has jettisoned the Communist world view in favor of the idea of Russia as a pragmatic and equal partner in world affairs, pursuing national interests and not motivated by any political ideology. Likewise, Russia has abandoned autarky and central planning in favor of an open, competitive market system, integrated into the global economy.

Even while the Putin regime has rejected some core features of the Soviet model at home, its external soft power efforts continue to tap into the reservoir of sympathizers amongst leftist and anti-colonialist circles around the world dating back to the Soviet era. The television network RT (Russia Today) utilizes leftist rhetoric, and Russian diplomacy relies heavily on

traditional Soviet allies such as Cuba, Syria, Vietnam, China, and India, and leftist regimes such as Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. They also appeal to Soviet nostalgia, especially among the older population in the post-Soviet states. The effort to reestablish Soviet era positions in the Third World was relatively successful in the early Putin period, especially in Asia. But the complexity of the global landscape and the presence of multiple conflicts meant that backing one country usually alienated others. Russia's intervention in Ukraine in support of separatists, after the fall of the Yanukovich government in February 2014, alarmed many countries around the world that face secessionist movements of their own and oppose the idea of unilateral changes to international borders through military force.

Any appeal to the Soviet past is particularly troubling for the rulers of neighboring post-soviet states. For Western-oriented elites such as those in Ukraine and Georgia, invocation of the Soviet past is seen as directly hostile, a threat to their reform efforts. And even authoritarian, anti-liberal leaders in countries such as Belarus and Kazakhstan do not want to see their countries lose their independence – since this would mean ceding their own personal power to Moscow.

Central Asia should have been a natural sphere for Russia's soft power influence, given its deep cultural influence over the region and continuing political and economic ties. However, Russia has steadily ceded ground to China in the region, and a process of 'derussification' has been taking place (Mukhin 2016, 56). The Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Kazantsev, Sinogubov, and Cherniavski 2012) prepared a report for the Public Chamber detailing the deficiencies of Russia's soft power in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It argued that support for Russian-speakers and invocation of the Soviet legacy produced a negative counter-reaction from nationalists in post-soviet countries and anxiety amongst their ruling elites. It is

particularly ineffective in the more authoritarian regimes which do not give any space for the Russian community to organize itself. They have no strategy for reaching the younger generation in those countries, while older generations, familiar with Russian language and culture, are dying out. Russia's ties are confined to leading circles and the 'party of power' in those countries, and typically they have few direct contacts with second or third tier officials, or with the political opposition (unless we are talking of support for separatists in Ukraine and Georgia). Labor migration from post-soviet countries has considerable potential as a source of soft power. Russia is host to the largest number of migrants after the US (some 10 million, before the 2014 crisis), and migrant worker remittances are critical for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Armenia (amounting to a quarter or more of GDP). However, migrant workers are not being developed constructively by Moscow as a soft power tool. On the contrary, they are typically treated as an economic and security threat by the authorities – and as a rallying point by Russian nationalists, appealing to xenophobic tendencies in the Russian population.

In the sphere of education, some Soviet-era advantages have been maintained. Students from the post-Soviet states study in Russian universities, and several of these have opened branches in neighboring states. However, Russia has invested inadequate resources in spreading its educational network – in contrast for example to Turkey's Gulen movement, which has created a web of Turkish and English-speaking schools and colleges in Central Asia. Cultural and scientific contacts have rarely progressed beyond formal measures, and there has been no systematic effort to tap into the expertise of people living in Russia who speak the languages and understand the cultures of these countries.

The instruments of soft power

Throughout the entire post-soviet period, the Russian Federation has failed to develop a clearly defined strategic plan for Russia's development. Despite Yeltsin's efforts to develop a new 'national idea,' no new ideological framework has emerged to fill the void left by Soviet communism. On the economic front, despite continued insistence that Russia must diversify away from oil and gas and become an innovation-based economy, in practice the country remains dependent on energy exports, its fate tied to the global oil price. The image of Russia as a 'giant gas station' (Senator John McCain) undercuts soft power efforts to promote Russia as a member of the G8 group of advanced industrial economies. Moreover, some Russian companies, including Gazprom, face accusations of 'exporting corruption,' which is sometimes seen, especially in Eastern Europe, as a part of Russia's soft power influence projection (Kazantsev 2012). The lack of a strategic vision also applies to foreign policy, which has oscillated between efforts to join the Western club and resentment at not being allowed through the door. In practice, despite the passage of a series of fundamental strategy documents, foreign policy has largely been reactive to external developments. But without clear long-term goals it will be impossible for Russia to devise an effective soft power strategy.

Western soft power is traditionally a combination of the actions of government agencies and the activity of numerous commercial and non-government actors, pursuing their own agendas and independent of government influence. In the case of Russia, the latter are relatively few in number, and instead we have seen a proliferation of government and quasi-governmental agencies that are engaged in soft power promotion on behalf of the state. Russian universities

and academic institutions do not have much of a global presence. One three Russian think tanks made it in to the University of Pennsylvania ranking of the top 175 global think tanks.⁴

In the wake of the color revolutions Russia created a number of new agencies to promote Russia's image and influence abroad. Marcel Van Herpen (2015) points out that some of these agencies were copies of other countries' institutions, while others were Russian innovations. Among the latter is the Valdai Club: in 2004 President Putin started an annual meeting with leading Western academics and journalists for a frank and direct conversation over several days, with its own web-based publications between meetings. 2005 saw the creation of Russia Today (subsequent renamed RT) an international television broadcast agency whose goal was to topple the BBC and CNN as sources of news and opinion on breaking developments around the world. The Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) foundation was set up in 2007 to promote Russian culture and language study, mimicking the Confucius Institutes that China had been rolling out over the preceding decade.⁵ It works in close cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, which in itself has come to serve as a tool of Russian soft power (Petro 2015). 2008 saw the creation of the Federal Agency for Working with the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), working under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and tasked with projecting Russian influence into the post-soviet states.⁶ In 2010 President Dmitrii Medvedev created two new elite institutions for handling foreign policy debates, the Russian International Affairs Council and the Gorchakov Foundation. January 2012 saw the creation of a new Fund for the Support and Defense of the

⁴ Carnegie Moscow Center was placed 24th, IMEMO 32nd, and MGIMO 123rd.
<http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-even-best-russian-think-tanks-struggle-influence-foreign-policy>

⁵ Official web site: <http://www.ruskiymir.ru/fund/>

⁶ Official web site: <http://rs.gov.ru/about>

Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad.⁷ There are also international agencies, such as the Interstate Fund for the Humanitarian Cooperation of CIS Member-States that was created in 2006 and now has 9 member states: it promotes joint cultural events.⁸

Russia Today

The new international television network Russia Today was designed not so much to promote Russia's image in the world, but to change the dynamics of the global media market by breaking the perceived monopoly enjoyed by Western news organizations such as the BBC and CNN, AP and Reuters. This more ambitious goal proved unrealistic, and may have ended up damaging Russia's international image. A more modest goal, of providing news about Russia and the Russian perspective on global affairs, might have been more successful.

Russia Today was lavishly funded, its budget rising to \$380 million by 2011. It sought a broad English-speaking audience through slick production values, attractive young presenters, and a willingness to chase the latest breaking stories with graphic images and attention-grabbing claims. It paid satellite and cable providers to run its shows, but also made all its output freely available on Youtube. On June 2013 it passed the threshold of 1 billion views on youtube (Van Herpen 2015, 71), though its claims to have more viewers than the BBC or CNN have been challenged by journalists from the rival Novosti agency (Zavadksi 2015). In December 2013 the RIA Novosti news agency, inherited from Soviet times, which had preserved a reputation for professionalism and accuracy, was folded into a new agency called Russia Today (while the television station changed its name to RT). The new head of Russia Today was the prominent ideologue and TV anchor Dmitrii Kiselev. On 16 March 2014, the day of the Crimean

⁷ Official web site: <http://pravfond.ru/>

⁸ http://www.mfgs-sng.org/mfgs/o_fonde/

referendum, he reminded Russian television viewers that ‘Russia is the only country that could reduce the US to radioactive ash’ (Kelly 2014).

Any viewer of Russian Today will soon experience cognitive dissonance. Domestically, the Russia regime legitimizes itself as a defender of traditional conservative values (nationalism, religion, a strong state, a loyal press, family values and so on). But Russian Today presents itself as a radical, free thinking critic of establishment thinking. Its broadcasts oscillate between ridiculing Western political correctness, multiculturalism, and gay rights on one side; while mounting a critique of American neoimperialism in Iraq and Libya, the excesses of capitalism, and constraints on freedom of expression in Western media. Similarly, in its ties with foreign political parties Russia spans the spectrum from support for leftists such as Die Linke (Germany) and Syriza (Greece) to rightists such as the National Front in France. At the producers’ end, there is no effort to explain how to reconcile these divergent ideologies; and it is not clear how the audience sorts out these mixed messages. The omnivorous Kremlin, encouraging both ultra-left and right-wing forces, may work against itself in the long run. In order to work, soft power requires some positive ideas and values which can attract people, but it is not clear that the Russian elite has grasped this point. Thus, one should not exaggerate the scope for Russia’s soft power, which is bedeviled by some deep internal contradictions.

Alongside official news agencies such as Russia Today, Russia also spawned a host of shadowy operations utilizing the internet and social media to spread false news stories reflecting badly on Russia’s adversaries, and hiring internet trolls to pack chat rooms with pro-Russian commentary (Aro 2015). Borthwick (2015) cites examples of a report that supposedly found that 26% of survey respondents in France supported ISIS, and another story of a chemical factory

explosion in Louisiana on Sept 10, 2014 that never happened. These practices are a direct continuation of Soviet-era disinformation tactics and have little to do with Nye's soft power.

Mega events as a source of soft power

Above and beyond these bureaucratic structures, the Russian government has seized on a range of projects to boost Russia's image in the arts, culture, and sport. Some of these initiatives are paid for out of the state budget, others are sponsored by state-owned corporations or individual oligarchs at the instigation of the Kremlin. They range from Gazprom's sponsorship of a new Continental ice hockey league (Jokisipila 2011) to hosting 'mega events' such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics or 2018 soccer World Cup.

One of the early successes for Russian soft power was the victory of Dima Bilan in the Eurovision Song Contest in Belgrade in 2008 (Cassiday 2014). The massively popular Eurovision contest is a peculiar mixture of kitsch and camp on a grand scale, culminating with popular voting for national champions amidst much geopolitical maneuvering. The winner's country gets to host the contest the following year. Russia's Bilan had finished second in 2006, and Russia redoubled its efforts to secure victory. This meant embracing the prevailing mores of the contest, from singing in English to a highly camp performance style. (The contest is popular with the gay community.) Russia's prominence in the contest proved a double-edged sword. In the wake of the annexation of Crimea and Russia's anti-gay campaign, at the Eurovision in Copenhagen in March 2014 the Russian contestants, the Tolkachev twins, were booed by the audience. Anti-booming technology was installed in Vienna 2015 for Russian contestant Polina Gagarina, who finished second to the bearded Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst. (Foroudi 2015) Conchita's victory made Russian conservatives livid. Hence Russia's participation in

Eurovision merely served to draw attention – on the international stage – to Russia’s problems in embracing mainstream European values (including LGBT rights).

The Sochi Olympics were on paper a success in that the games were well-run and went off without incident, and Russia finished at the top of the medals table. However, the run up to the games generated a lot of negative publicity for Russia. The Olympics ended up costing a reported \$50 billion – more than all the previous winter Olympics combined (Orttung & Zhemukhov 2014). The international media carried many stories about alleged corruption, displacement of local residents, and fears that gay athletes would be targeted by Russia’s new legislation forbidding gay propaganda to minors. An additional consideration was that in order to maximize their medal count, the Russians had to master international sports such as curling and snowboarding, and had to import Western equipment and trainers to excel. So in practice the Russian “brand” was subsumed under the generic international sports culture brand (Gorokhov 2015). This was even true of the lavish opening ceremony, summarizing Russian history – most of which was designed and choreographed by American and British experts hired for the purpose.

The timing of the games was unfortunate, since they coincided with the unfolding crisis in Ukraine. The closing ceremony took place on 23 February – one day after President Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine in the face of street protests, and three days before Russian special forces (‘little green men’) started seizing government buildings in Crimea. It would be hard to imagine a starker example of the contrast between soft power and hard power. Needless to say, the global image of Putin’s Russia was more indelibly shaped by the latter than the former.

Russia’s success in landing the 2018 World Cup was soured by the corruption scandal that led to the banning of FIFA president Sepp Blatter in 2015 – leading some to call for the re-

opening of bids to host the 2018 competition. In November 2015 the Russian athletics foundation was banned indefinitely from global competition by the International Association of Athletics Federations for systematic doping, raising doubts over their participation in the 2016 Olympics. These scandals illustrate the gap between standards of conduct in Russia and in the global community, and underline the challenges Russia faces in projecting a positive soft power image.

Negative soft power

Just as there is ‘good’ cholesterol and ‘bad’ cholesterol, one can also think of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ soft power. Russia has also found itself vulnerable to incidents which are seized upon by Western media to reinforce the negative frames of Russian behavior inherited from Soviet times.

The arrest of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, the murder of exiled former spy Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, the death in jail of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in 2009, and the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in 2015 all resonated with Western audiences used to hearing about Soviet suppression of individual dissidents. These dramatic cases generated huge amounts of negative publicity, and amount to a kind of ‘negative’ soft power. The Kremlin’s typical response in these cases is bluster and denial. For example, one of the alleged perpetrators of the Litvinenko assassination, Andrei Lugovoi, was subsequently elected to the State Duma. In the face of Western protests about the fate of Magnitsky, the prosecutors doubled down by taking the unprecedented step of launching a criminal case against him *after his death*.

After the challenge to Putin's rule during the street protests of winter 2011, the Kremlin responded by cracking down on the opposition and painting them as paid agents of the West. This coincided with a broader campaign asserting 'traditional values' in the face of Western degeneracy, focusing on topics such as gay rights and the alleged abuse of Russian children adopted by Western parents (a law was passed banning foreign adoptions). This campaign helped to boost Putin's popularity at home, but it sharply damaged Russia's image abroad. The poster-children for the campaign were the two young women of the art-punk rock group Pussy Riot, who were jailed for two years in 2014 after staging a protest in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. (Rutland 2014) Their arrest and sentencing triggered waves of protests in Western cities, and after their release they became international celebrities.

The case of Rossotrudnichestvo

Among the most salient of the new agencies that were created to mount Russia's soft power offensive is Rossotrudnichestvo. Its goal was to spread Russian influence amongst the 25 million or so ethnic Russians and 100 million Russian speakers in the post-soviet space. The ministry's 2010 document on cultural policy made it clear that while Russian culture is 'open to the whole world,' 'a priority is the development of bilateral and multilateral relations with CIS countries.' (Ministry 2010) This conforms to the argument advanced above that the main concern of Russia's soft power strategy was to prevent color revolutions in the post-soviet states. In the 1990s this region was referred to as the 'near abroad' (*blizhnee zarubezhie*) but in the 2000s Russian leaders and diplomats stopped using this phrase, since it implied that they were second-class states, with less sovereignty than the countries of the 'far abroad.' The preferred term by

the Russian Foreign Ministry these days is ‘near neighbors,’ perhaps echoing the EU’s European Neighborhood Policy, launched in 2003.

It has representatives in 74 countries but its total staff is only 600 (of which 415 are local hires) (Studneva 2012). This is quite modest compared for example to the 7,000 staff that work for the British Council. In Azerbaijan for example there are 107 foreign NGOs but only one Russian – the Rossotrudnichestvo branch. There only are six Russian NGOS in Armenia, and 240 foreign.

In September 2012 Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told a meeting of Rossotrudnichestvo officials that:

Strengthening our country’s position in the world, advancing national interests through humanitarian means, is one of the state’s main priorities. The humanitarian dimension has moved to the front rank of international affairs. The formation of Rossotrudnichetsvo four years ago must become one of the main instruments of so-called ‘soft power.’ To a large extent a state’s influence depends on its ability to develop its national culture and language and export them (Soveshchanie predstavitelei 2012).

Konstantin Kosachev took over as head of Rossotrudnichestvo in March 2012. Kosachev was an experienced diplomat and protégé of Evgenii Primakov.⁹ As foreign minister (1995-98) and prime minister (1998-99) Primakov reversed Russia’s pursuit of partnership with the West and instead promoted the concept of a multipolar world. Kosachev had ambitious plans to expand Rossotrudnichestvo’s reach. He identified three groups of possible sympathizers: the 30 million

⁹ <https://lenta.ru/lib/14179973/>

or so ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers living abroad, mainly in the former Soviet states; people who are interested in Russian history and contemporary Russia (c. 300 million people); and a wider circle who one way or another had some connection with Russia (Studneva 2011).

Kosachev argued that Soviet ‘soft power’ had been highly effective, in that ‘The reputation of the USSR abroad was at least not worse than what was actually happening in our country.’ Soviet propagandists were burdened by the fact that ‘They had to show the effectiveness of an ineffective system.’ Now in contrast Russia’s political and economic institutions have broken free from the Soviet past yet ‘The reputation of Russia is significantly worse than the actual situation in our country.’ Kosachev lamented that fact that China had managed to establish 850 Confucius centers versus the 81 outlets run by Rossotrudnichestvo. Kosachev was frustrated in his efforts to expand the modest budget allocated to Rossotrudnichestvo. Despite press reports that an ambitious new strategy was in the works in 2014, no new policy document emerged, and Kosachev left his post in December 2014 (for a sinecure in the Federation Council) (Galinova 2014).

Kosachev was replaced as head of Rosstrudnichestvo by Liubov Glebova, a former teacher and political functionary with no international experience, whose career included a stint as manager of a Young Pioneers center. A new book by a former Rossotrudnichestvo official Tatiana Poloskova revealed incompetence in the agency, and noted the very low number of scholarships available for students from post-soviet countries – 800 for Tajiks, 61 for Ukrainians. (Gopevoi 2015) Nevertheless, on 20 May 2015 Medvedev signed a four year 8 billion ruble (\$160 million) program for Russian language teaching abroad.¹⁰

¹⁰ <http://www.vz.ru/news/2015/6/1/748381.html>

The dialectic of hard and soft power

Russia grew increasingly alarmed by the US use of force – against Yugoslavia in 1999, against Iraq in 2003, and against Libya and (potentially) Syria in 2011. The popular revolts that installed pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003-4 also had a hard power component, in that it was assumed that those new governments would try to take their countries into the NATO alliance. Thus from Moscow's point of view American soft and hard power were working in tandem – against Russian interests (Sakwa 2015).

The Georgian war of August 2008 was the first case in the post-soviet era where the Russian Federation deployed military power across international borders. At the Bucharest summit in April 2008 NATO had come close to offering a membership plan to Georgia (this US proposal was blocked by Germany). Bolstered by US support, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili launched a military operation to retake South Ossetia, triggering the Russian invasion.

In a speech he delivered in Sochi on 31 August 2008 President Medvedev spelt out five principles of Russian foreign policy: the supremacy of international law; 'unipolarity is unacceptable'; 'Russia does not want isolation'; the protection of life and dignity of Russian citizens 'no matter where they live'; and 'Russia has areas of privileged interests' in the post-soviet space. (Medvedev 2008) The speech signaled that hard power considerations were back in the driving seat of Russian foreign policy.

Likewise, in Ukraine in 2013 Russia saw a hostile alliance encroaching on its traditional sphere of interests. This time it was the European Union, offering an association agreement that would lower trade barriers for Ukrainian goods. This was preceded by a growing 'crisis of trust' in relations between EU and Russia. Previously, Moscow had largely perceived the EU as a

positive economic actor, in contrast to NATO, a negative and potentially hostile security actor (Kazantsev and Sakwa 2012). Signing the agreement would however prevent Ukraine from entering Russia's free trade zone, the Eurasian Economic Union. At the last minute President Viktor Yanukovich decided not to sign the EU agreement – in part because Russia offered him a discount on natural gas deliveries and \$15 billion in soft loans. Public protests erupted in Kyiv, eventually causing Yanukovich to flee the country in February 2014. In retaliation Russia annexed Crimea and supported popular insurgencies in east Ukraine, in the name of defending ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers against the new nationalist government in Kyiv. Moscow also feared that the new government would expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from its base in Sevastopol, Crimea, and presumably take Ukraine into NATO.

For the first week, the Russian troops who fanned out across the peninsula seizing Ukrainian government buildings and military bases wore no insignia and refused to identify themselves. In foreign media they were called 'little green men,' in Russian 'polite people' (*vezhlivie liudi*). As the fighting escalated in the East Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, it became increasingly difficult for Russia to plausibly deny its involvement in supplying weapons and fighters for the insurgency. But deny they did, despite media coverage of captives and casualties amongst soldiers serving in the Russian army (who Moscow said were 'volunteers.')

Social media also played a role: Russian soldiers posted selfies on Facebook, which enabled Western journalists to track their progress (Vice News 2015).

The crisis culminated with the shooting down of Malaysian airlines MH17 on 17 July 2014, killing all 298 people on board. Western governments determined that it had been brought down by separatists operating a surface-to-air missile supplied by Russia. The shootdown persuaded European governments to join tough new sectoral economic sanctions on Russia

which had been proposed by the US. Moscow's response to this tragedy was to deny any involvement and launch a disinformation campaign arguing that Ukrainian jets had downed the aircraft.

Russia saw its actions in Georgia and Ukraine as legitimate acts of self-defense in the face of expansion of a hostile military alliance to its borders. For the West, however, Russia's military interventions represented a flagrant breach of international law, the dispatch of troops across internationally recognized borders without any clear evidence of a threat to national security.

Even Russia's closest allies in the Eurasian Economic Union (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) refused to follow Russia's lead in 2008 and recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The only countries that did were Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru. Likewise none of Russia's EEU partners recognized the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, nor did they join Russia's economic counter-sanctions on Western countries in August 2014. Russia had to be satisfied with the fact that 58 countries – including China – abstained in the 27 March 2014 vote condemning Russia's annexation of the Crimea at the UN. (100 countries supported the resolution and 11 voted against.)

Right up until the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, there had been an emphasis in Moscow on 'soft power' as a tool to promote Russia's national interests. However, after the onset of conflict in Ukraine 'soft power' came to be seen as part of 'hybrid war.' Russia is looking for a way to use 'soft power' as part of 'smart power,' 'normative power,' 'combined operations' and so on.

A flawed understanding

The absence of a theoretical consensus on what exactly is ‘soft power’ and how it can be utilized by Russia rests in part on a failure by the political leadership to understand exactly what soft power entails. This is connected to the pervasive cynicism and corruption pervading political life, which involves distrust in the significance of ‘words’ and a belief that material interests drive political life. (Soviet communism was explicitly “materialist” and Russian capitalism is even more so in the way it is practiced.) This all influences the elite’s conception of ‘soft power.’ The division of the Russian ruling elite into the *siloviki* and liberal wings has led to an association of ‘hard power’ with the *siloviki* and ‘soft power’ with the liberal’s economic program – though in the Western conception of the term, economics is a component of hard power. This was particularly true during the Medvedev presidency, when the term ‘soft power’ was often used by government officials. But once Western economic sanctions were imposed after the Ukraine crisis, and Russia responded with counter-sanctions, later extended to Turkey, it became even more absurd to regard these economic levers as part of ‘soft power.’

Another way in which soft power has become indistinguishable from hard power in Russian practice is the Russian military’s embrace of the doctrine of ‘hybrid war,’ in which ‘information war,’ deception, false flag operations, and so forth are seamlessly integrated with the use of military force. This doctrine was laid out in a much-quoted article by the chief of the General Staff Vitaly Gerasimov, and was put into practice in Crimea and East Ukraine. (Gerasimov 2013; Galeotti 2014) The term ‘hybrid war’ has negative connotations, so some Russian analysts hastened to deny that Russia was waging any type of warfare in Ukraine. (Pukhov 2015)

Folding soft power into ‘hybrid war’ is of course a travesty of Joseph Nye’s original concept – the whole point of which was to draw the distinction between hard and soft power, and

to explore how the latter works in ways separate from the former. The US deployment of soft power is not seen as necessary to prevent regime change in Washington. But this point helps us understand why the Russian foreign policy establishment has struggled to develop an effective soft power strategy. Merging soft power activities with hard power goals undermines the plausibility and appeal of the former.

The Ukraine crisis, combined with the global slump in oil prices (which fell 70% in 2014-15) has had a devastating effect on the Russian economy. Apart from the disruption of trade with Ukraine itself, the sanctions which many Western countries imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea have shut out Russia from international financial markets and deterred foreign investors.

A decline in Russia's international prestige

There are grounds for thinking that this deployment of hard power has seriously harmed Russia's image around the world. According to Pew Research, sympathy for Russia around the world has roughly halved since 2010. (Stokes 2015) The only possible explanation for this unprecedented sharp decline is Russia's actions in Ukraine. According to the Pew survey, conducted in 29 countries in March-May 2015, 51% of respondents had a negative image of Russia, and only 31% a positive image. (Negatives were a majority in 26 countries). Even amongst Russia's BRICS partners, negative views of Russia were expressed by a majority of respondents in Brazil (61%) and South Africa (51%). In China the positives outnumbered the negatives (by 51% to 37%), as they did in India (43% to 17%). In only three countries – China, Vietnam (75%), and Ghana (56%) – did an absolute majority have a positive view of Russia. Attitudes towards Russia

were more negative in Europe than in the US. Only 24% said they trusted Putin to do the right thing (while 58% held a negative view.)

As the crisis unfolded in Syria from 2011 on, Russia's strong backing for the Assad regime (supplying weapons and blocking hostile resolutions at the UN) drew international condemnation especially, among Sunni Muslim countries, and won it few friends outside of the Hezbollah-Iran axis. The Syrian case has been a mixed bag from the point of view of Russia's image abroad. Putin's deft intervention in the summer of 2013, persuading Assad to dismantle his chemical weapons arsenal and thus forestalling US military action in Syria, was a diplomatic masterstroke. However, Russia's military intervention in Syria in September 2015 to shore up the Assad regime has had a polarizing effect in the region, strengthening ties with Shiite countries such as Iran while alienating Sunni countries, notably Turkey. (And even with Iran, the relationship is now complicated by rivalry for influence over the Assad regime and growing competition in the oil market.) The fact that Russian actions seemed to be targeting moderate Syrian rebels and not just ISIS forces, triggering a new wave of refugees across the Turkish border, merely reinforced Russia's hard power image. So Putin's efforts in 2015-2016 to improve Russia's image by underlining common threats such as international terrorism does not seem to be working.

Conclusion

There are various organizations that issue soft power rankings, all of them based in Western countries and biased towards rewarding the values of advanced liberal democracies. Thus for example the *US News* 'Best countries' ranking (2015) placed Russia 24th out of 60 countries, behind China (17), Brazil (20), and India (22). Russia ranked second in military power and tenth

in size of economy, but 25th in cultural influence (which includes measures of whether the country is seen as influential, modern, trendy, and happy). The Institute for Government-Monocle soft power index, compiled in 2012, ranked Russia 28 out of 40. (IfG 2013) Russia did not even make the top 30 in the soft power index of the London-based Portland group (2016). In the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands index (Anholt 2015), based on a survey of 20,000 people in 20 countries, Russia ranked 25th in 2014, having experienced a 'precipitous drop' in esteem in the wake of the Crimea crisis.

Russia came late to the soft power game, with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. The lingering effects of the Soviet legacy, plus the disruptive Russian experiences with the transition to market economics and democracy in the 1990s, combine to make soft power a hard sell for Russian leaders. Economic success is a prerequisite for soft power – a country that is experiencing economic stagnation lacks the sense of progress and optimism necessary to project a positive international image. Russia was growing strongly in the 2000s but never recovered its pre-crisis growth rate after the 2008 crash.

The continuing dependence on commodity exports, the volatility of the ruble exchange rate (which gyrates in step with the world oil price), and the persistent and pervasive nature of corruption, all undermine Russia's sense of optimism and progress and make it difficult for the country to present an upbeat, positive image to the world.

The problems expanded considerably after Russia's deployment of military force in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015), which served to reinforce negative stereotypes of Russia as a brute force power. Russian conservatives are reconciled to this state of affairs. Hence Mikhail Leontiev (2016), a TV commentator who is now head of communications

for the Rosneft oil company, opined that ‘soft power is just the projection of hard power. Russia’s main soft power problem is a deficit of hard power.’

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